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Hundreds at rally urge protection of Mental Health funding

The Clarke County Arc of Alabama serves 17 people in their homes. But Terry Pezent, executive director of the Clarke County Arc, said budget cuts would wipe out that program, and many others.

“That’s the scary part about this,” Pezent said outside the Alabama State House Wednesday morning. “Clarke County is a rural area, at the southern end of the Black Belt. There aren’t a lot of options for employment or those things. We’re kind of nervous about how things are looking in our area.”

Pezent and a crowd of 300 to 400 people rallied outside the State House to urge lawmakers not to make any deep cuts to the Alabama Department of Mental Health, saying it could endanger needed services.

“We can’t afford to lose this,” said Matthew Grafton, a client of the Jackson County ARC who has cerebral palsy. Grafton credited the program’s services with allowing him to live independently. “I say to the people who want to cut this, shame on you. We need this.”

Gov. Robert Bentley’s proposed 2013 budget would cut state funding for Mental

Health from \$116.3 million to \$104.6 million. Commissioner Zelia Baugh has proposed responding to the shortfall by closing several hospitals around the state, laying 948 employees off and moving more clients into community-based service programs. The Department says that will make the department eligible for more federal matching grants.

“There’s no more bone or bone marrow to cut,” Baugh told supporters at the rally. “We have to look at what is viable for us as an agency, to infuse \$30 million into community programs.”

Those at the rally supported Baugh’s proposal.

“That gives us opportunities to look at different programs or alternative programs to accommodate people leaving those facilities,” said Tammie McCurry, executive director of HRDI in Montgomery, which runs group homes in Montgomery and Dothan. “It gives those individuals another opportunity to be in community-based

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program.”

Mental Health was scheduled to make a presentation before budget committee members Wednesday afternoon.

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